

Acting FBI director Andrew McCabe refutes claims that staff lost faith in Comey. Photograph: Eric Thayer/Reuters

Acting FBI head disputes White House claim Comey had lost staff support

Andrew McCabe tells Senate the White House's assertion that fired director James Comey had lost the confidence of the FBI rank and file 'is not accurate'

Julian Borger in Washington

Thursday 11 May 2017 12.30 EDT

The acting head of the FBI has said that James Comey, the bureau's director fired by Donald Trump, enjoyed broad support among its staff - directly contradicting the White House's assertion that he had lost the confidence of the FBI rank and file.

When confronted with the Trump administration's claim of Comey's unpopularity, Andrew McCabe - who has been the FBI's acting director since the sacking - told the Senate intelligence committee: "That is not accurate."

"I can tell you that I worked very, very closely with Director Comey," McCabe said on Thursday, pointing out he had worked as his executive assistant director of national security and then his deputy.

"I hold Director Comey in the highest regard for his considerable abilities and his integrity. It is the greatest honour of my professional life to have worked with him. He enjoyed broad support in the FBI and he still does to this day ... The vast majority of FBI staff enjoyed a deep and positive connection to Director Comey."

Trump continued his attacks on Comey on Thursday, telling NBC News: "He's a showboat, he's a grandstander, the FBI has been in turmoil."

Once more the president's remarks were quickly contradicted - this time by the Republican chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, Richard Burr, and his Democrat counterpart, Mark Warner.

"I found [Comey] to be one of the most ethical, upright, straightforward individuals I've had the opportunity to work with," Burr said.

Warner added: "I trusted Jim Comey ... I thought he was a straight shooter and frankly I'm offended at the president's comments today. This is a continuing pattern of disrespecting the men and women who serve in our intelligence community."

The Senate committee said it had invited Comey to testify on Tuesday but had not received a response so far.

Making his first public appearance since Comey's firing on Tuesday, McCabe promised to tell the Senate committee if he came under pressure to shut down the investigation into possible links between Trump's associates and Russia during last year's election campaign. He said he had met Trump this week but the Russian investigation did not come up in that meeting.

When asked by Senator Marco Rubio whether Comey's abrupt dismissal would impede the work of the FBI, McCabe was adamant.

"You cannot stop the the men and women of the FBI from doing the right thing and upholding the constitution," he said.

Later he added that the Russian investigation would be pursued "vigorously and completely".

McCabe's testament to the high esteem Comey was held in within the FBI came a day after the White House deputy press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said: "The rank and file of the FBI had lost confidence in their director."

McCabe also contradicted the White House on the scale of the Russia investigation. Huckabee Sanders had said it was "probably one of the smallest things" on the FBI's plate. McCabe denied that, calling it a "highly significant investigation".

Comey - who found out he had been fired when the news flashed up on a screen behind him when he was addressing staff in California - sent a farewell letter to FBI staff on Wednesday.

"It is very hard to leave a group of people who are committed only to doing the right thing," Comey wrote. "My hope is that you will continue to live our values and the mission of protecting the American people and upholding the constitution."

Widespread reports in the US media suggested that Comey was asking for more resources for that investigation. McCabe said he was not aware of any such request and insisted that the Russian investigation had the resources it needed.

Opening the hearing on global threats that heard evidence from the heads of the main US intelligence agencies, Burr, insisted that it would not be solely focused on the Trump-Russia enquiry. However, Democratic senators repeatedly returned to the issue, arguing that Comey's sacking made it even more relevant.

"It is impossible to ignore that one of the leaders of the intelligence community is not here with us today. The president's firing of FBI director Comey Tuesday night was a shocking development," Senator Warner, said.

“The timing of director Comey’s dismissal to me and many committee members on both sides of the aisle is especially troubling,” Warner said. “For many people, including myself, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the president’s decision to remove director Comey was related to this investigation. And that is unacceptable.”

Burr pledged that the Senate investigation of the Trump campaign’s Russia links would not be disrupted.

“Regardless of what happens in the justice department and the FBI ... the investigation that is being done by the intelligence committee will continue on its current course as aggressively as we are able to,” the Republican senator said.

Toward the end of the hearing, the deputy attorney general, Rod Rosenstein, arrived at the Senate building and entered its secure conference room. Burr and Warner abruptly left the open hearing to meet Rosenstein there. Later, the senators said the meeting was about de-conflicting the Senate investigation into Trump-Moscow links with the one being carried out by the FBI.

Rosenstein’s critique of Comey’s handling of the investigation into Hillary Clinton’s private email server was used by the White House as a justification for sacking the FBI director. Rosenstein was reportedly angry about the president using his report in that way.

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